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John George Diefenbaker

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 by *Ronald Wolf*

What can you say about a man who was not only extremely outspoken but also extremely brash.

It was 36 years ago today that Diefenbaker aka *Dief the Chief* and the former 13th prime minister was voted as a Member of Parliament 12 conservative times.

But he didn't appear out of thin air. A man like this had to evolve.

Diefenbaker was born on Sept. 18, 1895, in Neustadt, Ont., to William Thomas Diefenbaker and the former Mary Florence Bannerman. The family moved to several locations in Ontario in John's early years.

William Diefenbaker was a teacher, and had deep interests in history and politics, which he sought to inspire in his students. He had remarkable success doing so; of the 28 students at his school near Toronto in 1903, four, including his son John, served as Conservative MPs in the 19th Canadian Parliament beginning in 1940.

John had been interested in politics from an early age, and told his mother at the age of eight or nine that he would someday be Prime Minister. She told him that it was an impossible ambition, especially for a boy living on the prairies. She would live to be proved wrong. John's first contact with politics came in 1910, when he sold a newspaper to Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier, in Saskatoon to lay the cornerstone for the [university's](#) first building. The present and future Prime Ministers conversed, and when giving his speech that afternoon, Sir Wilfrid commented on the newsboy who had ended their conversation by saying, "I can't waste any more time on you, Prime Minister. I must get about my work."

After graduating from [high school](#) in Saskatoon, in 1912, Diefenbaker entered the University of Saskatchewan. He received his bachelor of arts degree in 1915, and his master of arts the following year.

With the First World War ongoing, Diefenbaker enlisted in the militia in March 1916, and was commissioned a lieutenant in May. In September, Diefenbaker was part of a contingent of 300 junior officers sent to the United Kingdom for pre-deployment [training](#). Diefenbaker related in his memoirs that he was hit by a shovel, and the injury eventually resulted in his being sent home. Diefenbaker's recollections do not correspond with his army medical records, which show no contemporary account of such an injury.

Diefenbaker returned to Saskatchewan where he resumed his work as an articling student in law. He received his [law degree](#) in 1919, the first student to secure three [degrees](#) from the University of Saskatchewan. On June 30, 1919, he was called to the bar, and the following day, opened a small practice in the village of Wakaw, Saskatchewan.

When Diefenbaker took office as Prime Minister of Canada on June 21, 1957, only one Progressive Conservative MP, Earl Rowe had served in office, for a brief period under Bennett in 1935. Rowe was no friend of Diefenbaker, and was given no place in his [government](#). Diefenbaker appointed Ellen Fairclough as Secretary of State for Canada, the first woman to be appointed to a Cabinet post, and Michael Starr as Minister of Labour, the first Canadian of Ukrainian descent to serve in Cabinet.

In the June 1979 election Diefenbaker defeated NDP candidate Stan Hovdebo (who, after Diefenbaker's death, would win the seat in a byelection) by 4,000 votes. Clark had unexpectedly defeated Trudeau, and Diefenbaker returned to Ottawa to witness the swearing-in of Clark's government, even though he was still unreconciled to his old opponents among Clark's ministers.

Two months later, Diefenbaker was found dead in his [study](#) at the age of 83.

John and Olive (nee Palmer, his second wife of 23 years) Diefenbaker rest outside the Diefenbaker Centre, built to house his papers, on the [campus](#) of the University of Saskatchewan.

This article is just a sample of Diefenbaker's life in and out of Canadian politics. No one can say that he never spoke his mind or was shy. After all, he was Canadian and like most or all Canadians, we have a mixed bag of talents and skills.

